RTw 12-Dec-93 13:12
NEW EVIDENCE PROMISED ON KING ASSASSINATION

MEMPHIS, Tenn, Dec 12 (Reuter) - A private attorney said Sunday he is seeking permission to present new evidence on the assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King to a Tennessee grand jury.

The lawyer, Wayne Chastain of Memphis, declined to disclose material that could be discussed at a county grand jury hearing. But he said the case will bring to light new figures involved in the 1968 killing.

"I will provide information concerning the murder of (the Reverend) Martin Luther King and involving persons other than James Earl Ray," said Chastain, who covered the King assassination as a reporter for the now-defunct Memphis Press-Scimitar newspaper.

Chastain requested a hearing before the Shelby County grand jury last week. He is asking that more than five witnesses be subpoenaed, two of whom want immunity from prosecution before testifying.

Representatives of King's family in Atlanta were not immediately available for comment.

State prosecutor John Pierotti branded the claim "a sham and a fraud upon the public" and said in an interview with the The Commercial Appeal newspaper that the case was not worth pursuing.

King, a towering figure in the American civil rights movement, was fatally shot on April 4, 1968, on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, where he had come to support a strike by local garbage collectors.

The assassination spawned riots in more than 100 U.S. cities.

His accused assassin, James Earl Ray, has long maintained his innocence since beginning a 99-year prison term in 1969.

The Observer in London reported Sunday that a retired U.S. businessman has confessed to hiring King's assassin and has applied for immunity in return for naming the gunman.

The newspaper said his testimony and that of four other witnesses -- a man and three women -- would apparently exonerate Ray.

Chastain declined to identify his client. But the attorney acknowledged his acquaintance with Bill Pepper, the London-based American lawyer who has been investigating the King assassination on Ray's behalf for about 16 years.

The London newspaper said the evidence will show that the businessman who hired the killer retrieved the murder weapon after the shooting and was assured that a decoy, presumably Ray, had been arranged to take the blame.

According to the businessman, who is white, the gunman was a

local man with a reputation for being a marksman and received $10,000. It is not known if the gunman is still alive.

The businessman went on to become a multimillionaire, building his empire on the $100,000 he was paid for organising King's assassination, according to the paper.

He said he was contracted by two men, a local entrepreneur with Mafia links and another man.

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